

BETTER THAN HAPPINESS

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The Selected Letters of Norman Mailer

Edited by J. Michael Lennon

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WITH THE PUBLICATION WITHIN THE LAST TWO YEARS of J. Michael Lennon's *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, Phillip Sipiora's *Mind of an Outlaw*, and J. Michael Lennon's *Selected Letters*, Mailer readers, aficionados, and scholars now have available to them the most complete record of Mailer's life, work, and ideas ever assembled. That all three books are structured chronologically by decades is additionally beneficial. If the biography gives us the most thorough insight yet into Mailer's works and days, and the selected essays in Sipiora's collection give us the evolutions of Mailer's public thought processes across six decades of his writing life, Lennon's *Selected Letters* now give us Mailer's more private, unguarded, often revelatory opinions and ideas from 1940-2007. Mailer's own accounts of his writing methods from his Harvard years to *Castle in the Forest*, of his marriages, of his children, and of his loves, friendships, and enemies are all laid bare, so to speak, for anyone seeking previously unavailable information.

Although Lennon (Mailer's Boswell) previously published sixty-six Mailer letters in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Playboy* and elsewhere, this is an indispensable book for scholars. Unless a scholar wants to spend four years, as Mike Lennon did, in the Ransom Center archives plowing through 45,000 or so letters from Mailer and well over 110,000 let-

ters to Mailer. But life is short, and Lennon's selected 716 letters brilliantly cover the work and life of this major post-war author.

The letters offer a great deal of advice on writing to neophytes and old pros alike, and the reader who is not a professional writer learns here what professional writers know as few others do. The real writing life is an endless obsession—a vocation, and an unavoidable, driven labor to create meaning and understanding through language—that dominates every other element of one's life. Such a life is a far cry from our common fantasies of "being a writer." (Particularly if one is trying to be a serious novelist in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.) It is a life sentence of hard labor, achievement and disappointment, emolument and ridicule, grace and struggle. And there's no judge or parole board, other than death, to bail you out. Tenacity, Mailer tells us, is the one thing a writer must have beyond all else. It is the mark of the born artist. Although productivity is often painful, it is also "better than happiness." If like John Updike, Mailer was finding while still at Harvard that his writing life seemed to be "all happening too easy" because he was already capturing the attention of editors and publishers, Mailer would, unlike Updike and after *The Naked and the Dead*, find his career collapsing in the 1950s, initiating a painful, and sometimes misguided, experimental process of recreating himself as a writer and human being. This grand experiment on himself is related through these letters more intimately and poignantly than ever before. In his letters to psychoanalyst Robert Lindner, for example, we witness Mailer's defiant remaking of himself as the dissident artist who would emerge in 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself*. These *lettres intimes* to Lindner are the closest he ever got to analysis, but it was largely self-induced analysis. "Itch, you bastards, I hope I make you uncomfortable to death," became his overarching theme from 1953 on.

One of the revelations in this collection is Mailer's letters from the Pacific Theater to his first wife Beatrice Silverman. The process of getting down in retainable prose the details of what was to become *The Naked and the Dead*—Mailer's epistolary writer's journal—that as Mike Lennon demonstrates in his notes, allows us to see what the young Mailer used, often word for word, or close to it, for the novel's characters and setting. The letters from the spring of 1944 to the fall of 1946 are both a record and a purge of an enlisted man's experience of traveling to strange worlds and becoming a warrior. And when Mailer finally landed in a recon outfit he felt "happy for the first time." It was in the Pacific that he discovered one of his central themes:

the significance of courage—that most ancient virtue—as the foundation of self-respect in art, love, and life. It is in the later letters of 1946 also that I first noticed the emergence of the Mailerian style, the rhetoric, “the orotund,” as he would later call it. He would never be a minimalist or a mere post-modernist because he soon found his way toward a Melvillean style and a deep-seated conviction that “hard objective reality exists” beyond us, that we must grapple with it, and that we thereby enlarge our own consciousness and our effect on the external world. Early and late throughout this book the full measure of his ambition to be a serious, enduring writer is fully on display.

It was after *Advertisements* during the 1960s that he would finally make his comeback from rejection, bad reviews, self-doubt, and floundering. *An American Dream*, his forced-march serial for *Esquire* before it was revised into a book, and then the success of his political journalism and his “New Journalism,” most notably with *The Armies of the Night*, won him wide notice, magazine offers, a National Book Award, and a Pulitzer. Even readers who already know how Mailer’s decade in the wilderness turned out will feel a sense of relief as the man whose inmost thoughts, self-examinations, and vulnerabilities they have followed comes through. But as he once said “I have a demon inside me,” causing missteps that made even his admirers cringe. Nowhere was this truer than in his obstreperous public reaction to the women’s movement, 1970s version. His new overconfidence from his 1960s breakthrough, his “elephantiasis of the ego,” as he called it, his testy contrariness, and his oversensitive nose for technological and corporate totalitarianism, all caused his renewed success to founder on the rock of women’s liberation. Despite the fact that he adored the women in his extended family, had many women among his correspondents who wrote with mutual love and respect, admired the work of Joan Didion, Lillian Hellman, and Iris Murdoch, among others, and wanted women, as he said even in his reviled *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), to be free of both stifling domestic restrictions and corporate servitude, he couldn’t stop himself from ill-advised public blurtings any more than he was able to see women’s liberation, especially at its most strident and misandrous, as yet one more potential for the larger human liberation he advocated for so ardently otherwise. There are letters collected here that refer to this misstep, this misunderstanding, if perhaps not quite enough given its significance to Mailer’s legacy.

But I was heartened by two facts in particular. The first is a 1975 letter to novelist Don Carpenter wherein Mailer writes that although you can't write a good novel on a program "using ideology as a crutch," the "fundamental notion[s] that women are good, women deserve to be liberated, etc." are nonetheless ideas that have "absolutely nothing wrong . . . as social or revolutionary ideas or even viable life ideas." The second is that Kate Millet (the recipient of his critical upbraiding) and Mailer finally sat down together for a drink and amicable talk in Provincetown. He considered *Prisoner* some of his best literary criticism, and an unbiased reader decades later might agree that he did know his D.H. Lawrence and did call out a scholar when, as he said and demonstrated, to "grind her thesis" Millet quoted partially, out of context, and out of order from Lawrence's work—work that was a reflection of Lawrence's own life-long, imperfect and often stumbling quest in search of some deeper, post-Victorian rapprochement between men and women.

The letters contain many insightful and painful observations on marriage, divorce, and women writers he admired, suggesting a tenderness, humanity, and nuance that his public statements about Women's Lib did not. He will probably not be forgiven for that shortcoming in vision and public expression. Will we be capable of surmounting that flawed moment in his life enough to enlarge our understanding of his broader legacy: that he was indeed out front (sometimes at personal and professional risk) on other political issues such as Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, our nationalistic blunders abroad, economic injustice, environmental degradation, and the proxy and corporate-protection wars of our own often paranoid government? The jury is still out, and unfortunately might well stay out for decades, it seems to me.

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Along with fine advice to writers on novel writing, these letters also lay out Mailer's own goal in writing against the tide of minimalist dread, anomie, and deterioration of form. He seems to have seen certain contemporary literary trends as in league with the publishing establishment's ensuring the eventual death of serious literature. His May 10, 1990, letter to Edward McAlice sums up one element of his skepticism: "I'm kind of pissed that Random House gave you no more attention than that. It's a mark of our lit-

erary times. Your work is so rich and talented that I promise you, in the old days, even if you had been rejected, there would have been the dignity of personal attention and some discussion of what you were doing and failing to do. Now it's just 'No money here—goodbye.'" To Don DeLillo, he writes in 1998 in praise of *Underworld*: "I guess we're two of the few Mohicans who still think you can do something about America in a novel."

Mailer's first doubts about the American publishing industry's lack of literary seriousness appear as early as 1946, but his real focus in these letters is on trade publishers during a benighted era of consolidation. Speaking of trade publishers, I'll add my wish that there was some solution to their insistence (it seems to be nearly industry-wide) on avoiding true footnotes or endnotes, as if any whiff of the dreaded academic monograph might sink their corporate ships. Without a textual superscript keyed to endnotes at a minimum (a true footnote is even more to the reader's convenience), piles of notes at the back without any indication that a note to a letter or a line or a name lies in wait for the unsuspecting reader is hardly publishing books with real readers in mind. I ended up resorting to dog-earring each of the scores of pages of notes one at a time and turning to my dog-ear at the back of the book after reading each letter to see if some explanation or clarification or interesting data point happened to reside there. Frequently, Lennon's excellent notes were helpful and fascinating. Why, Dear Publisher, make such essential information, garnered at great labor by the editor, so indifferently available?

Another thing that struck me off and on as I read these letters was my sudden desire to read the exchanges between Mailer and some of his most interesting interlocutors. I wanted to know what initiated or what response was elicited from a particular letter to Bea Silverman, Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, John Aldridge, Robert Lucid, John Ehrlichman, Jack Abbott, or Abbie Hoffman, to name just a few. There's an August 10, 1960, letter to his frequent correspondent Diana Trilling wherein Mailer lays out with astonishing frankness a self-assessment full of revelatory insights about himself. Such self-analysis was equaled, it seems, only in his correspondence with psychoanalyst Robert Lindner. But of course such exchanges are not the purpose of this collection. Perhaps scholars will now be motivated to collect the epistolary exchanges between Mailer and certain correspondents. (I understand Professor Jerome Loving is already at work on a book about the Jack Abbott-Mailer relationship, including a healthy dose of their epistolary ex-

change, entitled *State-Raised Convict: Jack Henry Abbott and the Legacy of The Executioner's Song*.)

Since I'm among a minority, apparently, who admire Mailer's tour de force satirical novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, I was fascinated by Mailer's account of the inspiring Alaskan adventure that laid the foundation for that fictional encapsulation of his long public struggle against the Vietnam War—probably the most absurd and wasteful conflict ever imposed on the United States and other peoples by political ideologues, until George W. Bush & Co. blundered into Iraq. Just as his discussion in another letter of *An American Dream* helped me understand a novel I had underappreciated, Mailer's discussion of *Why?* highlights the humor, the language (including some purposeful nonsense), and the rhythms of youthful rebellion in a way that might win others over to his accomplishment in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*—the only one of his novels that sprung forth easily on a wave of inspiration. And the entire section on the decade of the 1970s will illuminate for all readers the processes and struggles of creating his most accessible and admired, in his words, “special brand of journalism.” In fact, we also learn that the novel *Ancient Evenings* was inspired in part by his boredom, finally, with more than a decade of such journalism.

One of the delights of these letters is Mailer's sense of humor. When Judith Daniels of *New York Magazine* requested of Mailer some 200 words of wisdom on writers' block for an unspecified honorarium, he replied: “No greenbacks make-um big fuck-um block.” Or to Jack Abbott: “When are you going to get it through your head, Jack, that any media representative, if they want to fuck you, have more opportunities than a prison guard, and to pour out your heart and say what you think to a media representative whom you have not checked out from asshole to appetite is equal to a pretty boy stepping into a tank for the first time and saying, ‘Gee, do any of you fellows have a light?’” Any interviewer who ever felt that the author was a little guarded or less than forthcoming might now see why. There are many other humorous moments, just as there are many moments of flawed humanity and courage.

Let me offer in closing a moment typical of Mailer's courage. Upon the death of Allen Ginsberg, George Will (our mop-topped, most conspicuous toady to the One-Percenters), wrote in his nationally syndicated column that Ginsberg after all was simply a conman. Ginsberg was not only a raving madman, but worse, someone who pawned lunatic visions *to make a profit*. Gins-

berg made a career, Will glibly informed us, “execrating American values and works,” and turned this “attempted subversion” into a “marketable commodity.” Many Americans no doubt found comfort in Will’s assurances. However, Mailer would have none of it. Do you not think that Mailer, ever at the battlements, is closer to the mark in a letter he sent on June 21, 1997, to be read at Ginsberg’s memorial celebration? “Sometimes I think Allen Ginsberg is the bravest man in America . . .,” Mailer wrote. “[I]f I had had his life, if I had been a Jewish homosexual with an insane mother, I would not have been as brave as Allen, I would not have broken through, I would not have become the greatest poet in America and have done it uphill all the way. No, Allen had the stuff of which Paul Bunyans are made, and with it all, he cared so much about so many people that he gave life and honor to the most inconceivable contradiction of them all: he was wild; he was responsible. Of such incompatibles is compounded the mortar of his art work.”

J. Michael Lennon’s *Selected Letters* is a book no scholar, aficionado, or serious reader of Mailer can in good conscience avoid.